

Locating Trans-border Subjects: Hong Kong Working People in Mainland China

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I. Introduction

On a direct train to Dongguan, one early morning in June 2002, Hong Kong working people were busy using their mobile phones talking in Mandarin (with strong accents) with their China counterparts. Already it was daily practice for thousands of Hong Kong residents to work across the border in Mainland China. Crossing the border became an eye-catching issue, granted coverage by Time Magazine in May 2001, where it states, “Nowhere is the demarcation more striking than at its border with Shenzhen - a line that Hong Kong people can cross freely but most mainlanders can only gaze at. The one-way traffic has become a nonstop flood: up to 200,000 people a day, 100 million crossings a year, a number likely to triple by 2010.” According to the Hong Kong Annual Report 2000, Mainland China is the most important trading partner with Hong Kong. 40 per cent of its trade was with the Mainland and three quarters of the 18 million containers handled by the port of Hong Kong were connected to trade with the Mainland, mostly to and from the Pearl River Delta region. On average, 31,000 vehicles and 280,000 people traveled across the boundary every day during the year of 2000.¹

This chapter aims to locate globalization in multiple specific temporal and spatial scales with special reference to the labour flow of Hong Kong across border in Mainland China in general. It involves a study of the making of trans-border labour relations between Hong Kong and China as this being rapidly configured in the period since the 1997 hand over. Going beyond a dichotomy between the “space of flows” and the “politics of place”, this study will explore how building trans-border social relations has a key role in realizing globalization as a multi-scalar, multi-temporal, and multi-causal process (Smith 2001). The study of trans-border labour relations as central to understanding globalization processes in Hong Kong and/or China is much needed as many previous studies have had a penchant for looking at transnational capital or social networks (Ong and Nonini eds, 1997; Ong 1999). More specifically, this chapter has three objectives. First, it hopes to understand the trans-border labour flow in terms of its multi-scalar politics as new labour relations are forged in the restructuring of Hong Kong’s political economy. Second, by situating the multi-spatial and multi-temporal moments of globalization in a particular labour flow between Hong Kong and China, we can explore not only novel forms of cross-border labour relations but also the process of how these forms are

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¹ Hong Kong 2000, available at “<http://www.info.gov.hk/hk2000>”

constructed in all its conflict and tension-ridden nature. Third, we will highlight the cultural production of this trans-border subject and its implications for identity issues. Thus we will carefully study the agency and lived experiences of trans-border subjects in the age of globalization.

II. Situating Trans-border Space

The rapid restructuring of Hong Kong society, especially in terms of “economic integration” with South China, created a new concern with the trans-border economy and urban space in the new millennium. China's entry to the WTO reinforces the demand for accelerating a multi-scalar mix in the direction of trans-border fusion between Hong Kong and the Pearl River Delta Region, in which new forms of urban governance, market networks and societal links are being forged. In light of China's incorporation into the global market, the current spatial restructuring between Hong Kong and southern China, which has developed over the last two decades, will be accelerated. New spatial enclaves cutting across borders will be governed through emerging forms of trans-border relations, involving both state and non-state networks and actors. Amongst of all these networks and actors, the cross-border labour flow of Hong Kong working people to and from Mainland China constitutes one of the complex configurations of this trans-border fusion.

Looking from a multi-scalar point of view, this trans-border configuration is made possible by the changing geopolitics of both sides: South China and Hong Kong. Upon the establishment of the People Republic of China in 1949, Guangdong Province was the major gateway connecting the whole country to the outside world. Canton City had been one of the important cities in connecting the national economy with global capitalism. Its geographical location at the southern end of China made the region more competitive and conducive to international capitalist players. China's Open-door policy and the Economic Reform of the late 70s brought forth a great change in the geopolitics of South China, especially when Special Economic Zones (SEZs) were set up, followed by many newly developed industrial towns. The “open-door” policies were the first attempt to incorporate the socialist system of China - the national-local spaces into the global market - the global-regional scalar mix (Breslin 2000; Sum 1999). SEZs in China were widely known as experimental practices combining a socialist planned economy with a global capitalist market in new and productive ways. In 1979 the Party Central Committee announced a special strategy of allowing Guangdong and Fujian to set up SEZs as the base for launching export-led industrialization and inviting foreign investment. In May 1980 a small town, Shenzhen was chosen for setting up the first SEZ in China. Shenzhen then became the first immigrant city in Reform China, established as a test case, as an economic development zone open to international capital. Situated in the far south of Mainland China, Shenzhen is close to Hong Kong, and every day thousands of people, mainly Hong Kong citizens go hurriedly back and forth across the Lo Wu bridge separating and yet linking the two places. It takes about forty-five minutes by train from the Kowloon Railway Station to the Lo Wu bridge, and then join the queues to go through the Customer Gate. During the weekends or at Chinese New Year and other big traditional festivals like Ching Ming and Mid-Autumn, queuing for an hour or more is normal.

This bold experiment of establishing special economic zones won support from key party elites and coastal-provincial actors in East China, especially when the four special economic zones and fourteen coastal cities witnessed a rapid influx of foreign capital and fast development in the 80s and 90s. Breslin (2000) rightly states that the development of the SEZs brings us to the importance of China's gradual process of re-engagement with the global economy. The rapid increase of foreign direct investment and joint-ventured cooperation, especially with Hong Kong capital in the 90s, thus allowed the national-local scales of Chinese industrialism to link up with the global and regional scalar mixes. The pace of new spatial configuration was greatly accelerated with the rise of Shanghai as a global city in the late 90s. China's entry to the WTO in 2001 and Beijing's successful bid for the 2008 Olympics finally signify a rise in China's status as a globalizing society. All these encourage rapid, extensive and magnificent spatial re-organization for capitalist development in multi- scalar processes. Local states thus take very active roles in initiating new projects in cooperation with non-state actors outside China, particular with Hong Kong in the field of transportation, industrial investment, property, informational sectors as well as the financial market. This led to a process of reformulating trans-border alliances between external non-state actors and domestic state and state-related actors (Breslin 2000).

In this context, strategic images of "Greater China" were enhanced - "South China Economic Circle", "Chinese Economic Community", "Border Free Trade Zone", and "Triangular Growth" - to present an image of vibrant economic interactions (Sum 1996; 1998). These trans-border discourses help to constitute a re-mapping of Hong Kong, southern China, and Taiwan as part of an imagined community of "Greater China". They work to re-map HK as a "gateway" to China, "Greater China" and the rest of the world when increasing Hong Kong capital and labour was flowing into the region. Hong Kong is by now the biggest investor in China, exceeding the USA, Japan and other European countries since 1979. A new form of "trans-border integration" was articulated when both governments worked together to regulate "triangular growth" across the border.

On the side of Hong Kong, its rapid integration into China's economy highlights its role as a gateway city serving as a stepping stone for Taiwanese, Japanese and other foreign investment seeking to move into Mainland China. The economic strategy advocated by the first Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) government after 1997 was that of an entrepreneurial *middleman*, acting as a bridge between China's economy and the global economy. After the transfer of sovereignty to Mainland China, political obstacles to further trans-border economic fusion were removed. Good relationships between the Hong Kong government and the Central government have speeded up "trans-border integration" and the role of South China as a gateway increased gradually. Not only does Hong Kong provide support to the manufacturing base, which has now moved to South China, but also serves the regional economy by linking up global sourcing, trading and producer servicers with the trans-border economic activities.

Starting in the mid-80s, the Hong Kong economy underwent a process of de-industrialization and a massive relocation of manufacturing industries to South China. The late colonial government, busy negotiating sovereignty issues, adopted a let-go approach. By mid-1988, about 2,400-2,700 enterprises of Hong Kong industrial capital had relocated to the

Pearl River Delta in Mainland China, most of them involved in manufacturing. It has been estimated that over 30% of Hong Kong's manufacturing has moved to the Mainland, among which some industries like the electronics and plastics industries even amounted to 70-80% in the early 90s². Correspondingly, the proportion of Hong Kong's workforce employed in manufacturing also dropped drastically- from a peak of 869,753 persons in 1986 to 257,042 in 1998.³

The development of the Hong Kong economy demonstrates a deepening of labour-intensive industry by incorporating Southern China as the production base, while Hong Kong retains the service part of the production process. The manufacturing sector has become management oriented in coordinating cross-border processing in Guangdong with the remaining operations performed in Hong Kong. This emerging multi-scaled territorial governance is aptly described by Sit and Yang (1997) as a "front shop, back factory" model. And while the share of GDP contributed by manufacturing has declined drastically, in the 90s service industries (including trading, finance and business services) have taken over as the engine of Hong Kong's economic growth. In the 1990s, the Hong Kong economy has been transformed into a post-industrial one. It was not until the handover that the newly established SAR government, to gain legitimacy from the general public, attempted to restructure the city by actively imagining a grand vision of a regional gateway city in Hong Kong (Pun and Lee 2002).

The Asian Financial Crisis and its aftermath hit the Hong Kong economy badly at the time of its restructuring into a regional financial city. The unemployment rate rose to 7.8% in mid 2002 and still there is no trace of improvement. Furthermore, one of the most active post-industrial economic activities in Hong Kong - the bubble in the property economy - has burst and asset prices have dropped by over 50% in 2002 in comparison to the highest prices in 1997. The poor performance of the economy has contributed to the worst unemployment problem in Hong Kong's history since the rapid industrial development over the last three decades. The serious unemployment problem pushed the SAR government to further depend on the trans-border imaginary to solve its internal economic crisis. In his 2001 Policy Address, the Chief Executive of the SAR government, Tung Chee Wah stressed that HK as a gateway city has a unique position, with the Mainland as its hinterland and extensive links to all corners of the globe. Tung said, "At a time when foreign investors are vying to enter the China market, we are already well positioned to seize the opportunities they seek."⁴ Tung also boasted that Hong Kong's infrastructure, such as the Hong Kong International Airport and the international container port, were world-class, as were the talents of Hong Kong's professionals and their management experience. Thus, he said,

"We are in the right place at the right time to benefit most from the economic development of our Motherland..."

² See Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong SAR Government, 1986-1998.

³ *Ibid.*, 1986-1998.

⁴ Hong Kong Government Policy Address 2001, p6. Available at <http://www.info.gov.hk>.

Following China's accession to the World Trade Organisation, co-operation between Hong Kong and Guangdong will rise to new heights."⁵

The Hong Kong government thus openly encourages trans-border flow and persuades its citizens to look for jobs in Mainland China. The trans-border flow is aided by extensive newspaper coverage and media propaganda. "Looking northward", literally meaning to search for opportunities in China to the north, suddenly becomes a new hegemonic discourse. An editorial in a major Chinese newspaper in Hong Kong, *Ming Pao Daily News* titled "Citizens could consider working on mainland" strongly encourages Hong Kong people to work in China. On October 17, 2001, it states,

"When the mainland's economy soars, people well versed in international trade will be in great demand there. Mainland businesses will then need financial professionals, accountants, lawyers and people experienced in import and export business. Many Hong Kongers have much such experience. If they are prepared to work on the mainland, they are likely to accomplish much.

In the 1950s and 1960s, many Hong Kongers left the territory to seek their fortune. Some set up garment factories in Africa; others opened restaurants in South America. Now Hong Kong's economy is in difficulty and unemployment is rising, capable people, especially capable young people, should be ready to achieve their goal anywhere in the world. Hong Kong is close to the mainland culturally, linguistically and geographically, and the pay gap between them has narrowed. If we capitalize on these advantages, which people in other regions are not blessed with, we can surely start a new chapter for ourselves and for Hong Kong."⁶

These official and hegemonic discourses encouraging Hong Kong people to find a way-out in Mainland China seem a bit redundant if not ridiculous. Besides the state factors, trans-border interactions between Hong Kong and the Pearl River Delta, from the bottom up, have been underway for more than two decades.⁷ In addition to capital relocation, both in manufacturing and services sectors, cross-border employment, marriage and housing have already become conspicuous social phenomena in the last decade. Breslin's effort (2000) to differentiate the concept of regionalisation from the concept of regionalism is helpful for us in examining the trans-border labour flow to and from Hong Kong. On the one hand, regionalism, says Breslin, consists of top-down processes relating to conscious and deliberate attempts by national states to create formal mechanisms for dealing with trans-border issues. On the other hand, regionalisation refers to "bottom-up processes where the most important forces for economic integration come from markets, private trade and investment flows, and from the policies and decisions of companies, rather than resulting from predetermined plans of national or local governments"(2000:207). The creation of a trans-border spatial structure thus was more inclined to informal and soft integration and reliant on the actions and decisions of non-state actors. The

⁵ Ibid, 2001, p.8.

⁶ Ming Pao's own translation. See Ming Pao, 18 October 2001.

⁷ For the concept of transnationalism from below, see Michael Smith, ed. 1998. Transnationalism from below. New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers.

trans-border labour flow between Hong Kong and Mainland China no doubt was a kind of regionalisation process before it was co-opted into a regionalism process when the Hong Kong government put it under its imagineering project for planning a “South China Economic Circle”.

A “trans-border regionalisation” has been emerging long before the governments on both sides finally came to the scene, attempting to promote or regulate it. According to a survey conducted between April and June 2001 by the Census and Statistics Department, there should be more than 190,800 Hong Kong residents working on the Mainland, equivalent to 5.9% of the total employed population of Hong Kong at the year of 2000-2001.⁸ A special topics study done via General Household Survey in 1999 gives a full panoramic view of Hong Kong people working in China, recording that the number has been increasing rapidly over the past ten years.⁹ In 1988 it records only 52,300 persons who had worked in Mainland China, while the number rose sharply to 157,300 in 1998. Of the 157,300 persons who had worked in Mainland China, the median age was 39. The majority was aged between 30-39 (35.5%) and 40-49 (32.9%). The report speaks against the hegemonic discourse that the new Hong Kong generation, especially university graduates, could have opportunities to find jobs in Mainland China. One of the important findings of the trans-border labour market is that the employment opportunities are mostly available to the experienced managerial class, professionals or skilled workers. 79.6% of the newly created jobs were solely open to the managerial class and professionals, as shown in Figure 1. Moreover, over 86.2% of them were males. This means that most of the female working population of Hong Kong was excluded to a great extent in this “trans-border economic integration”. The trans-border labour market, in fact, is highly skewed in terms of age, gender and skill factors.

Looking carefully, only 72.7% of Hong Kong people working in Mainland China were employees; and the rest were employers or self-employed persons. There is an increasing trend for more and more small businessmen to set up their shops across the border, clustering in the Commercial Building City of Lo Wu. For the employees, 95.3% were actually employed by companies in Hong Kong to work in Mainland China. Few of them could really go Mainland China and find a job across the border. Among all employed, 43% of them were in the wholesale, retail and import/export trades, restaurants and hotels sector and 37.8% in the manufacturing sector. According to the figures, the percentage of Hong Kong labourers engaged in the manufacturing sector in Mainland China decreased from 58% in 1995 to 37.8% in 1998. In contrast, the percentage of those engaged in the wholesale, retail and import/export trades, and the restaurants and hotels sector was rising across the border.

⁸ It should be noted that persons who had been to Mainland China only to conduct business negotiations and the inspection of businesses, and/or to attend trade fairs, meetings and business-related entertainment were not regarded as having worked in the Mainland. Moreover, transport workers commuting between Hong Kong and the Mainland as well as fishermen and seamen working within the waters of the mainland of China were also excluded from the figures quoted above. See the report on <http://www.info.gov.hk/censtatd/chinese/hkstat/index2.html>.

⁹ Special Topics Report No. 21, Social data collected via the General Household Survey, Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong, 1999.

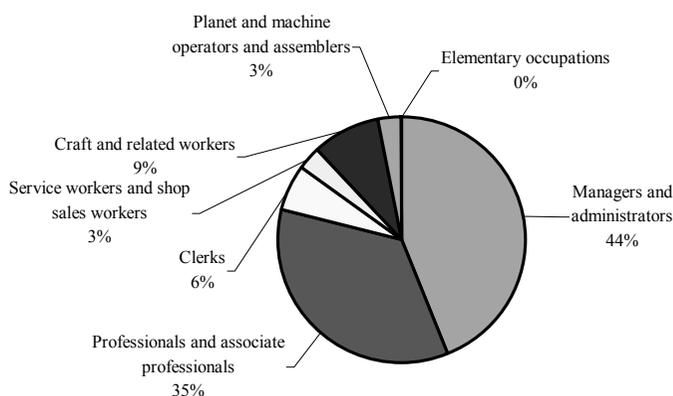


Figure 1 Hong Kong residents working in Mainland China by occupation in 1998

Source: Special Topics Report No. 21, Social data collected via the General Household Survey, Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong, 1999.

Table 1 Hong Kong residents working in Mainland China by industry in June 1998

Industry	No. of Person (‘000)	Percentage (%)	Compared to all employed persons in HK (%)
Manufacturing	50.5	37.8	12.0
Construction	5.6	4.2	10.3
Services (wholesale, retail and import /export trades, restaurants & hotels, and other services)	57.4	43.0	30.4
Others	0.9	0.6	46.6
Overall	133.5	100.0	0.7

Source: Special Topics Report No. 21, Social data collected via the General Household Survey, Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong, 1999.

The figures also show that about one-third of the Hong Kong working people first started working in Mainland China before 1990. It reveals that trans-border labour flow starts as early as capital flow and long before the Hong Kong government would adopted that economic vision or strategy. The figure of most concern is the duration of stay in Mainland China - most of the Hong Kong working people will still consider it drudgery rather a challenge to work on the Mainland. The median duration of stay in China was 3 days each time the Hong Kong labourers traveled across the border in 1998. 47.3% had an average duration of stay of 1 to 2 days; and 17.8% of 3 to 4 days.

The above statistical data provides us a broad view of trans-border labour flow in terms of Hong Kong people working in Mainland China. The picture foretells a process of “trans-border economic integration” from below which first sprouted in the early 1990s, long before the proliferation of state discourses ten years later. According to these macro statistical views, trans-border labour flow has been the central part of the globalization process, specifically in the multi-scalar configuration and trans-border making between China and Hong Kong in the 90s and this will continue in the coming years.

III. Trans-border Move

The first phase of the “trans-border move” made by Hong Kong manufacturing was in the 80s and 90s. Looking at the number of manufacturing establishments, it had dropped sharply to 23,631 in 1998, which was equivalent to less than 50% of the total number of factories in 1988. More than 600,000 Hong Kong labourers were laid off and had to find new jobs in the services sector, construction or retailing industries during the ten years between 1988 and 1998. In the trend of relocating production bases to Mainland China, only a small section of employees were maintained for helping to transfer the industry and management of the new set-ups to Shenzhen or the Pearl River Delta. This small section of employees were the pioneers of the trans-border labour flow, mostly becoming managers or supervisors in their Mainland production lines, and thus making up the first wave of the trans-border managerial class in the 90s.

Following the relocation of manufacturing industries to Mainland China, the Hong Kong producer-related services sector also re-scaled their organizational set-up by reducing their business operations in Hong Kong. In recent years, many transnational companies like the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank Corporation (HSBC) and Pacific Century (PCCW) decided to move their back-office work to Shenzhen or Guangzhou. For instance, PCCW moved its customer service center to its Guangzhou office and from August 2001 some of its Hong Kong employees had to go work in Mainland China. In addition to the large firms like HSBC and PCCW moving their back-offices to the Mainland, some small local firms also made the “trans-border move” in re-organizing their business and management structure. The reason was simply to make use of the multi-scalar competitive advantages of cheaper land and labour costs in the Pearl River Delta. For example, employing one university graduate from Mainland China in audit work would only cost HK\$2000 each month, a figure six times lower than employing a fresh graduate in Hong Kong. Therefore in order to be cost effective, many companies gave up their bases in Hong Kong and moved to the Mainland. The working class in Hong Kong thus faced increasing unemployment problems and severe competition with Mainland workers.

To alleviate their employment problems Hong Kong labourers have two choices (or no choice). Either they can follow in the footsteps of transnational capital and cross the border, and therein become part of the “trans-border move”, or struggle to reshape themselves in the new services sector which actually had been contracting in recent years. Now nearly all openings for both industrial and commercial firms, as shown in the recruitment pages of newspapers, require job duties on the Mainland. A willingness to stay in China is a prerequisite, accompanied by fluent Mandarin. Thus working in China has become a trend, if not a necessity, for Hong Kong

people. This trans-border labour flow is further boosted by repeated reports in the mass media that many big Mainland enterprises or companies will employ Hong Kong professionals or workers in their businesses. At the end of 2001, Shenzhen Special Economic Zone Daily added to these reports, releasing the news that over 100 enterprises in Mainland China had decided to employ Hong Kong professionals in trading, financial and administrative fields in 2002.¹⁰

IV. The Emergence of Transborder Working Class

The second part of this chapter will draw on ethnographic studies of Hong Kong cross-border truck drivers. The trans-border working class, often a neglected subject, although in its nascent stage is growing more and more mature in its form. One conspicuous feature of this trans-border working class is the rapidly increasing number of cross-border truck drivers. It has been estimated that more than 30,000 truck drivers are involved in cross-border transportation between Hong Kong and China. The living experiences of these drivers are vastly different to the Hong Kong managers or professionals in coping with the trans-border life. Relatively younger than the managerial class people, these truck drivers, often in their early 30s, are still single or have their families established in Mainland China. Since they were more required than the trans-border managerial class to adapt their lives to the Mainland, these truck drivers would often mix the domains of their work and their family by marrying or staying with a Mainland woman. Some of them even had a second-wife illegally in Mainland China.

Mr So, aged 32, has been a cross-border truck driver for eight years. Five years ago, a Hong Kong printing company, whose production base is in Dongguan, employed him. With more than 1,000 workers in its Dongguan factory, the company produces books and magazines for Japanese market. This involves frequent land transportation between Dongguan and Hong Kong so that its products can be exported via Hong Kong entrepot to Japan. Thus Mr So was hired as a full-time 24-ton truck driver for the company to take up this busy transportation. His duties are mainly to carry raw materials to the Dongguan factory from a supplier in the New Territories and to bring finished products back to the Hong Kong warehouse. His driving route and also the work pattern are repetitive. Every time he goes to Dongguan, after unloading the raw materials at the company, he has to stay overnight in Dongguan because it will be too late to return to Hong Kong on the same day. He will start the return journey to Hong Kong the next morning with finished products loaded on his truck. Typically he has to stay about twenty nights a month in Dongguan.

A Cross-border Truck Driver's Work Schedule in November 2001

8:30am	leave Dongguan
12:00pm	reach New Territories and wait for production materials to be uploaded
1:50pm	leave New Territories after uploading materials and having his lunch
2:25pm	arrive at Lok Ma Chau and queue up to cross the border at the Hong Kong side

¹⁰ Shenzhen Special Economic Zone Daily, 20 December 2001.

3:30pm	complete the border crossing procedure via the border through Huanggang, Shenzhen
5:05pm	arrive at the Dongguan Customs and wait for the immigration documents
7:00pm	still wait for the documents and have dinner on the truck
8:30pm	finally get the sealed documents and drive to the Dongguan factory
9:00pm	arrive at the factory and unload production materials

Because of his long working hours and frequent stays in Dongguan, Mr So can earn a monthly salary of \$15,000 to \$18,000, which is relatively higher than a local truck driver. This salary allowed him to set up a trans-border family – enough to both to buy a flat and to support household expenditure. A friend in Dongguan introduced him to his wife three years ago and he decided to get married and set up his family there. For him, there is little choice because of his cross-border work pattern and the financial burden of forming a family in Hong Kong. As he spends the nighttime in Dongguan after taking this job, it seems more natural for him to settle down in Dongguan than in Hong Kong.

Nevertheless this trans-border settlement never leads to his “assimilation” into Mainland society. He is still reluctant to blend into this society. In his eyes, Mainland society is full of social disorders such as corruption, crime, traffic chaos, bad and slow work pace, cheating and so on. Whenever talking about the identity issue, he insists on claiming himself as a “complete” Hong Konger and resists the idea of sharing any cultural traits with the Mainlanders. “Although I have a Mainland wife now, I still don’t like the Mainlanders. If I have son or daughter in the future, I will have them educated in Hong Kong and apply for them to leave Mainland China. Dongguan is not a nice place, nice people won’t come here.”

Resistance to “trans-border fusion” from a socio-cultural aspect is crystal clear here. The border is still a very important dividing line for inscribing identity between Mainlanders and Hong Kongers. The actual “physical” fusion - work and family - goes hand and hand with a “cultural” segregation, which is rooted in the daily work experiences of the truck drivers. These truck drivers are often discriminated or bullied by local Customs officials. Every time they crossed the border, the Customs authorities would only inspect Hong Kong trucks, resulting in them waiting for longer hours. The drivers often had to make under-table deals with the Customs inspectors for quicker cross-border procedures. Other Customs staff would also target Hong Kong drivers and squeeze money out of them at any opportunity. Bad feelings are often generated, which do not contribute to harmonious relations between the two sides. For these truck drivers, they have to work with somewhat different social values, which allow them to single themselves out as Hong Kong people. Value conflicts with the Mainland Chinese are thus inevitable, leading to a “trans-border distance” instead of “trans-border fusion”. Mr So emphasized that if it were not because of the difficulty of finding a job in Hong Kong, he would never have turned to becoming a cross-border driver, and thus having to face the so many disliked persons on the Mainland.

However, there are interesting and sharp gender differences in stereotyping Mainland people. The truck drivers were more inclined to see these negative traits in men than in women. In the eyes of the cross-border truck drivers, Mainland women are more simple, understanding and tender, especially those from inner-China. The drivers are often likely to develop some sort

of relationship with them either as legal or illegal wives or simply as girlfriends. More of the drivers actually develop quite long-lasting relationship with Mainland women because, in their own words, cross-border driving gives them a sense of floating here and there, and they rather would have their body, if not their soul, settled somewhere, preferably with a woman. This feeling of “floating” is not only restricted to single men, as most of the married drivers will also use the same “excuse” to set up their second family in Mainland China, leading to increasingly serious family crises in Hong Kong.

V. Conclusion

This chapter on Hong Kong’s cross border labour attempts to understand new trans-border configurations in light of Socialist China’s incorporation into global capitalism and Hong Kong’s transforming into a global city concomitant to its rapid economic restructuring. The making of “trans-border space” involves the politics of scale - the complexity of the multi-scalar mix that may cause fusions as well as conflicts over national sovereignty, local autonomy, cultural identity and everyday practices at different levels. There will be a contest of different discourses and identities because both spatial areas may be embedded in different political systems, cultures and values. The study of the trans-border working class of Hong Kong - contributes to understanding this complex and conflictual process of trans-border fusion or diffusion in its very specific temporal and spatial scales. The making of trans-border labour relations between Hong Kong and China is rapidly constituted and constituting, especially in the period since hand over in 1997. This study reveals how trans-border social relations have a key role in realizing globalization as a multi-scalar, multi-temporal, and multi-causal process.

The trans-border working people are the liminal subjects living out the tensions of this multi-scalar trans-border space in their everyday practices. The term “trans-border persons” vividly depicts them as subjects of flow, who contribute to bridging the different spatial scales between Hong Kong and Mainland China. Successful or not, their “cross-border work experience” is the new work pattern produced for meeting the scalar mixes of global production. Nevertheless, if we look from a micro-cultural perspective, resistance to “trans-border fusion” is very strong. The border, as a “physical and visible wall”, is still a crucial dividing line for cultural identification between Hong Kong people and the Mainland Chinese. The border is only open unconditionally to Hong Kong citizens, not vice versa. Excepting a few talented professionals, the majority of the Mainland Chinese are still excluded by the border from working and living in Hong Kong. On the other hand, while increasing numbers of Hong Kong labourers have to work and form their families in Mainland China, mainly in the Pearl River Delta Region, the actual fusion of the realm of work and family in South China does not result in “cultural assimilation”. Instead, cultural segregation is further created and embedded in the daily experiences of the trans-border working class. General distrust, rigid stereotyping, value conflicts and different social systems at large generate the conflictual and tension-ridden nature of this “trans-border space” in the making.

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